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First
and
Last

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FIRST AND LAST



"MOST there now!"

A girl who had been traveling wearily down the road paused, as a square, many-windowed building stood revealed in the noon sunlight. She was dusty and travel-worn, but her dull, face brightened as she caught sight of the mission school, which was her goal. She shook the dust from her faded dress, straightened the sunbonnet upon her head, and sat down upon a stone by the wayside to put upon her bare feet a pair of well-worn shoes, which she had prudently carried in her bundle lest the

journey should prove too much for their endurance.

"I'm most there now," she repeated, as if there were many things in the past which



that comforting assurance atoned for. Then, her efforts at making herself presentable being completed, she hastened forward again.

Her pleasure, unfortunately, was not shared by those in the building. A teacher, standing at an upper window, watched the approaching figure, curiously at first, then with a growing recognition that brought a look of trouble into her eyes. She hurriedly called to a lady who was passing through the hall :

“Miss Grey, will you come here a moment, please? I believe that is 'Cretia.'”

“Oh, I hope not !” was answered earnestly, but, after a minutes careful scrutiny, the added words came slowly, “Yes—it is.”

The two teachers looked at each other in dismay, and the eyes of the first speaker filled with tears.

“She is coming back, poor child ! And we can do nothing for her now. We are crowded almost beyond endurance, and we cannot take another.”

'Cretia had been with them the previous year, painstaking, but dull—a slow, plodding girl, who could not be considered a very promising pupil. She was penniless, with no friends to aid her, and, as it must be all charity, the teachers had sometimes questioned anxiously whether they were justified in using the Church's money upon one from whom they could expect no higher return of usefulness. Such questions of economy

seem awful when they relate to souls, but funds and room were limited, and even mission teachers cannot compass the impossible. So it had been in some measure a relief that 'Cretia did not return after the summer vacation.

Three weeks of the term had passed and she had almost dropped out of mind. Now here she was again, bundle in hand.

"I done—I hev come back, Miss Mary," she said, making a sudden effort to correct her language as the familiar atmosphere of the school brought back a remembrance of its teachings—"I didn't get yere at first, 'cause—because I stayed to earn some more money. Laws, but I worked hard all vacation! Yere 'tis, Miss Mary—twelve dollars."

She was untying a knot in an old handkerchief to exhibit her little hoard, and her fingers trembled with excitement. "'Tain't no ways right to have all youn's—you—gimme everything, and I arned this."

The teacher's eyes had grown misty again; well she knew how few chances of employment these girls had, and how small a pittance the most toilsome labor would bring. She knew, too, the pressing needs of the daily life, and all the hardships and self-denial these savings represented. Her voice trembled as she spoke:

"But, 'Cretia, dear girl, we didn't know you were coming; we haven't any room for

you now. I can't tell you how sorry I am to say it, but we have no place left."

'Cretia smiled contentedly.

"Oh, 'twont take much room for me. I reckoned you'd be about full. Anywhere's 'll do."

"But, child, there is no 'anywhere'—no place at all where I can put you. We are more than full," urged Miss Mary, reluctantly. The admission of the last two pupils had been a case of heart against judgment, and the building had been crowded to its utmost limit.

Still 'Cretia smiled her slow smile. She had learned to look upon Miss Mary as a being who could plan her way out of any dilemma—one to whom everything was possible. But, when at last she understood, the light vanished from her eyes. She did not cry or utter any protest. A gray pallor crept over her face, she nervously fingered the faded folds of her dress; and then in a dazed, bewildered way tied up the earnings that had so failed of their purpose and gathered up her bundle.

"Do not go yet, 'Cretia; stop and rest a while and have some dinner," urged the teacher, kindly.

But the girl shook her head.

"'Pears like I ain't hungry, Miss Mary. I kin git back to Ma'am Swanzy's by night. I reckon I'll stay there till mornin'; it's nearer home."

She did not say she could not bear the pain of seeing others in the place she had thought was hers; that the merry voices that reached her from the halls and stairways were intolerable. She did not even consciously think it; she only knew that she wanted to get away and be alone.

The teacher dimly comprehended and, remorseful for the grief she could not prevent, again explained how powerless she was to do otherwise, and once more expressed her own keen regret.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am, 'Cretia, but you see I cannot help it."

"I ain't noways blamin' nobody, Miss Mary. I 'low I'd better be goin'; it's mighty fur to walk."

The unconscious dropping into old expressions told how completely she felt herself barred out from new hopes and aspirations. Miss Grey watched the drooping young figure trudge away down the lonely road—away from the help and hope for which it had struggled so bravely. Then she saw Miss Mary with tearful eyes pass silently to her own room. Miss Grey's black eyes were not tearful—they were flashing.

"How I wish," she said, emphatically, "that I could transport those two big heart-aches right into the middle of some great rich church at the North. Yes, I do."

'Cretia walked steadily on until a turn in the road had hidden her from observation

and a strip of desolate woodland shut her in. Then she threw herself down beside a great tree and bowed her head on her folded arms against its gnarled roots. It was late in the afternoon of the following day when, with weary, lagging footsteps, she reached her home—a little cabin in the valley. The door stood open, revealing the dancing flames in a wide fireplace, and the figure of a woman silhouetted against it as she gazed at something on the hearth. She turned at sound of 'Cretia's step, but though she must have felt surprised at the girl's unexpected appearance she did not express it.

“Yer back ag'in, 'Creshy?”

“Mammy, they couldn't take me; the school was plumb full.”

There was a little catch in 'Cretia's breath as she spoke. Her eyes were sad and heavy, her whole bearing weary and dejected. The mother's eyes saw it all in one quick, scrutinizing glance, but she made no comment. Language, like everything else in their lives, was scant and poor. She had never been able, indeed, to fully understand her daughter's awakened aspirations. After one year at the school, 'Cretia had seemed to her a marvel, whose acquirements she viewed with mingled pride and awe, and she could not in the least comprehend what the girl wanted of “more larnin'.” She had not opposed her wishing and work-

ing, however, and even helped her after a fashion, but she did not know how to offer sympathy now.

“’Twas a powerful long tromp for nothin’,” she said. Then, after a moment, with a little motherly resentment against something or somebody, she added, “’Pears like they might ’a waited fur ye.”

That was all, she busied herself with stirring up a cake of cornmeal and water, putting it on a board, and setting it up in front of the fire to bake. Then she fried a bit of bacon, and the evening meal was complete. It was eaten almost in silence, but afterward, sitting in the firelight with her Bible on her knee, ’Cretia found comfort. She came in her slow reading to the account of the beautiful city with its welcoming gates on every side; its gates that are not shut at all by day; its life-giving waters of which whomsoever will may drink.

“Nobody ’ll hev to be crowded out there; it ’ll never be too full fur them that wants to come,” she said, “an’ everybody that’s heerd is to tell them to come. I reckon I might do that yet.”

To learn enough to help others had been the object of her newly awakened ambition, and the thought that such help might still in some small way be in her power came with wondrous healing to the sore young heart. Through much of the night she lay

open-eyed, her slow brain gradually shaping its desire into a plan.

The money she had so toilsomely earned seemed too precious for any common use. She looked at it wistfully the next morning.

"'Pears like I want to get something like school out'n it someways, for somebody," she said.

The mother could not understand the feeling, but despite all limitations the germ of true motherhood was hidden somewhere in her silent nature, for she said not one word of pressing needs; she only answered briefly:

"I 'low ye can do what ye like, 'Creshy."

A small, half-ruined cabin was secured, some rude benches put up by the unskilled hands of a half-grown boy, a few children of widely varying ages were gathered in, and so the little school began. But even with such primitive arrangements twelve dollars could not last always, and Miss Mary at the mission school was one day surprised by a letter—a letter pathetic in its very meagreness, that simply told what 'Cretia was trying to do, and the need all about her. Could Miss Mary spare a few books and some Bibles? There were only two Bibles—'Cretia's own and one other—in all the place.

The reply was a box of supplies, followed a little later by Miss Mary herself. The day of arrival was warm and pleasant, and

the school, which had outgrown its narrow quarters, was holding its afternoon session out of doors. Children of all sizes were seated on the grass or on convenient stumps, while the young teacher, slow still, and unassuming in her simple earnestness, was patiently trying to teach what she herself had been taught. It seemed to Miss Mary, in the few minutes that she stood there unobserved and unwilling to interrupt, that the hungry heart must have treasured all it had ever heard. Then 'Cretia turned and saw her, and caught both her hands with a glad cry :

“ Oh, Miss Mary ! Now my poor scholars will have somebody to tell 'em ! ”

The same thought was in her face a little later when, as the sun drew near its setting, the circle of hearers increased. Men and boys returning from the fields stopped to listen, and a few women came from the cabins and joined the group. That this was the usual custom the visitor soon learned from the comments of those newcomers on the Bible lesson she was teaching.

“ Yes'm, we'uns heard 'Creshy say that.”

“ Reckon that's what 'Creshy was tellin' las' week ; it's pow'rful true.”

Miss Mary looked upon them with eyes that saw through a mist. The story of their hard, barren lives was written in the faces turned toward her ; and as she turned from

them to 'Cretia, so unconscious of self, of toil and privation—so anxious only that the light should fall on these—she seemed to hear a voice not of earth, saying :

“There are last that shall be first.”

KATE W. HAMILTON.